The Iraqi Spring

Social Media and Political Activism

Ahmed Al-Rawi

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Work Around the Globe: Historical Comparisons and Connections

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Most human beings work, and growing numbers are exposed to labour markets. These markets are increasingly globally competitive and cause both capital and labour to move around the world. In search of the cheapest labour, industries and service-based enterprises move from West to East and South, but also, for example, westwards from China's east coast. People move from areas with few employment opportunities to urban and industrial hubs, both between and within continents. However, labour relations have been shifting already for centuries, labour migrations go back far in time, and changing labour relations cannot be comprehended without history. Therefore, understanding these developments and their consequences in the world of work and labour relations requires sound historical research, based on the experiences of different groups of workers in different parts of the world at different moments in time, throughout human history.

The research and publications department of the International Institute of Social History (IISH) has taken on a leading role in research and publishing on the global history of labour relations. In the context of Global Labour History, three central research questions have been defined: (1) What labour relations have emerged in parallel with the rise and advance of market economies? (2) How can their incidence (and consequently the transition from one labour relation to another) be explained, and are these worldwide transitions interlinked? (3) What are the social, economic, political, and cultural consequences of their changing incidence, and how do they relate to forms of individual and collective agency among workers? These three questions are interconnected in time, but also in space. Recent comparative Global Labour History research demonstrates that shifts in one part of the globe have always been linked to shifts in other parts.

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This book is dedicated to all Iraqi activists who died calling for unity over religious and ethnic divisions as well as seeking an end to corruption, freedom from oppression, state-led terror, and independence from foreign interference.

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Preface

This book could not have been written without the feedback I received from the Iraqi activists interviewed in this study. They were very generous with their time and insight on the state of activism in Iraq. I am forever grateful for their willingness to share their experiences despite the security risks and difficulty of disclosing personal details often involving trauma.

When I first submitted the book to Amsterdam University Press, Maryse Elliott expressed keen interest in the book project. I am grateful for her dedication and support for publishing this book, and I appreciate her patience in finding appropriate peer reviewers.

I would also like to thank Dr. Betty Ackah from the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University for her assistance in helping me with writing the literature review on hybrid identity section. I am also thankful for the kind assistance I received in copy editing this manuscript, especially from Monica Roche for her organizational skills. Finally, special thanks also go to Courtney McLaren who copy edited an earlier version of this manuscript.

Introduction

The Arab Spring was not the result of a sudden event. Before it began in late 2010, protests had already been staged in some Arab countries that paved the way to this major event, especially the Revolt of the Gafsa in Tunisia and the April 6 Youth Movement in Egypt. When Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire on December 17, 2010, a wave of protests swept Tunisia and triggered the start of the Arab Spring. The fleeing of the former Tunisian president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, to Saudi Arabia created hope for real change that comes from peaceful protests rather than political assassinations or coups, as had been the case with many previous revolutions in the Arab world. Most other Arab countries followed the example of Tunisia, where the youth felt frustrated with the lack of employment opportunities, disappointed with the corrupt political systems, and lack of social and political equality and freedom. In Yemen, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Jordan, Syria, Bahrain, Oman, and Saudi Arabia, they decided to publicly display their disagreements with their governments. This study, however, deals with the under-researched country of Iraq, and I argue that it is important to take into account the unique political context and demographics of the country to better understand the nature of political activism. Most Western media attention has been directed toward Tunisia and Egypt and later, Syria, but the Iraqi Spring was somehow underreported. One of the main reasons for this lack of attention was the ongoing violence in the country that overshadowed revolutionary calls for social and political change.

While Nouri Al-Maliki was the Prime Minister of Iraq in 2011, the country witnessed one of its worst phases of sectarian divisions, partly due to Al-Maliki's pro-Iranian agenda and incompetence. As a result, Iraqi activists staged fervent protests in 2011 against corruption, sectarianism, and favoritism of Al-Maliki's government. A group of young Iraqi intellectuals, journalists, students, government employees, and unemployed youth posted their plan to organize demonstrations against the government using social media in February 2011. As a result, tens of protesters were killed by security forces. The situation, however, worsened during the 2019–2021 protests

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where over 600 Iraqi activists were assassinated by security forces and armed militias. This study focuses on these major events.

I call the post-2003 protests the "Iraqi Spring" for a few reasons. First, the literature on the Arab Spring, which is commonly known to have started in Tunisia in late 2010, does not often cover the events that preceded these protests. Since 2003 and following the U.S.-led invasion, Iraq has witnessed tremendous changes to its political, economic, and social structures. I argue in this book that there is a need to call the protests that engulfed the country an "Iraqi Spring" because of its unique historical, demographic, and political circumstances.

Before the Arab Spring, there were many Iraqi protests that were organized against Coalition Forces and the Iraqi government due to the relative freedom that Iraqis enjoyed after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. Some of these protests were driven by lack of employment opportunities, corruption, and perceived injustice. In most cases, the protesters were peaceful, yet many unfortunate incidents happened, leading to the death of some innocent civilians such as the case of the killing of 17 protesters during a demonstration against U.S. Forces on April 28, 2003. This demonstration happened just five days after U.S. troops entered the city. In authoritarian Arab countries like Syria, Tunisia, and Egypt, such anti-government protests do not often happen because the protesters and their families will be swiftly and sometimes severely punished. In Iraq, however, it was a different case due to the recent political changes.

Second, Iraq's demographic diversity is unique in the Arab region as the majority of other Arab countries have largely mono-sectarian affiliations. For instance, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait are mostly Sunni, while Oman is mostly Abadhi. To this day, Iraqis adhere to tens of religions and sects and belong to a variety of ethnicities. Arabs constitute most of the country followed by Kurds, Turkmen, Assyrians, etc. In terms of religions, Shiite Islam is the most dominant group followed by Sunni Islam, but there are also large Christian, Yazidi, and Sabean communities scattered throughout the country. There are also tribal affiliations that have become increasingly important after 2003 due to the lack of a strong central government. This ethnic mosaic makes the issue of Iraqiness or a distinct national identity more complicated, and I argue in this book that the Iraqi identity is hybrid and fluid, consisting of several layers depending on one's religious values, geographical locations, social and financial status, and tribal affiliations. This hybridity has a direct impact on political activism, for protesters are often pressured by their religious authorities and/or tribes to either reject or join protests. I explore this hybrid identity by offering a

brief historical and critical understanding of these various identities and the landmark transformations that happened since the establishment of an independent Iraqi state in 1932. I argue that the Iraqi Spring protests attempted to enhance a largely secular Iraqi identity that bypasses religious, sectarian, gender, and ethnic differences, and shares common values like government transparency, equality, and justice for all, something that many Iraqi politicians, extremists, terrorists, and militias stood strongly against.

Another important area I explore in this book is the meaning of political activism. In Chapter 1, I will survey the literature on this area, but I argue that Iraqis have not been passive during Saddam Hussein's rule, unlike common understanding. On the contrary, activism was manifested in various ways, including the emergence of critical weekly newspapers in the mid-1990s, and how a few Iraqi journalists, some of whom were jailed or executed, attempted to discuss democracy, especially following the invasion of Kuwait and Iraq's subsequent defeat. Political activism was also manifested in the repeated coups and assassination attempts against Saddam Hussein, many of which were organized by Sunni officers. Activism was also indirectly performed in the way anti-regime and anti-Saddam cassette recordings and VHS videos were smuggled into the country and shared. Verbally, jokes about Saddam Hussein were secretly circulated and satellite channels were often viewed though the former regime's banned satellite dishes. This chapter is based on (1) surveying the available Arabic and English literature on the issue of activism, (2) conducting interviews with a number of Iraqi journalists who were active during the previous regime, and (3) using archival materials following three research field trips to the National Iraqi Library in Baghdad in 2022 and 2023.

As mentioned above, this book focuses on the contemporary protests in Iraq, and there is no published academic book so far that has extensively explored these protests. Theoretically, I engage with the literature and concepts surrounding networked authoritarianism of hybrid identity in order to better situate the discussion of political activism in Iraq. In terms of method, I have used a mixed approach, including conducting ethnographic research by interviewing 10 Iraqi activists in three countries. To better understand the meaning of activism, I have also interviewed a few senior Iraqi journalists, as mentioned above. Also, extensive digital and systematic manual analyses of social media content were conducted, and data were collected from more than five online platforms including Telegram, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. I have also identified a trolling network on Twitter which consists of militia members who routinely spread disinformation when targeting human rights activists and independent Iraqi

journalists in order to undermine their credibility. Additionally, I employed a Supercomputer to extract data that helped me find and better understand the cyber operations of Iranian state-run trolls who supported these militias. These trolls targeted the same groups with similar disinformation, and the original insights identified have not been reported before.

In Chapter 1 on political activism and the Iraqi national identity, I present a theoretical background mostly built on the conceptualization of political activism in Iraq due to the networked authoritarianism that Iraqis live in. This kind of authoritarianism includes state online surveillance and political parties' use of paid electronic flies, online armies, and trolls. One of the original contributions in this chapter is the exploration of the Iraqi national identity because of its complexity and multi-dimensional aspects.

In the second chapter, on the socio-political context after 2003, I provide an understanding of the complex political and social developments that Iraq witnessed after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion. This chapter also surveys social media and mobile use in Iraq and cites previous media and communication research on the Arab Spring in Iraq.

In Chapter 3 dealing with social media, news, and information operations in Iraq, I discuss the role of social media by focusing on the Iraqi context. The chapter also offers an empirical understanding of how news and social media are used by Iran and Iraqi militias to target activists, journalists, and oppositional voices. A theoretical discussion is offered on the meaning of terrorist journalism, and the chapter relies on new evidence and insight collected from various sources, especially Twitter, to better understand the bad actors' information operations.

Chapter 4 deals with political activism and civil resistance in the 2019 protests. It also presents the findings of interviews with 11 Iraqi activists (10 males and one female) in order to understand the challenges they both faced in expressing their views and communicating dissent. I have conducted these interviews virtually and in-person in Baghdad, Iraq, Beirut, Lebanon, and Istanbul, Turkey. Most of the activists mentioned different types of intimidation, threats, and risks that they encountered in order to shame and silence them.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the Iraqi identity in political activism during the 2011 and 2019 popular protests in order to understand the main topics and issues that activists are engaged with. For the 2011 protests. Regarding the 2019 protests, the data were collected from unique sources like Telegram, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook.

Finally, the conclusion sums up the main arguments of the book and provides some concluding remarks regarding the present status and future prospects of political activism in Iraq.

Though this book focuses on the Iraqi protests, it attempts to broaden the discussion to include issues of national identity and political activism, two areas that can help the reader understand the nature and motivation of these protests. Also, references are made to regional and international players, especially the United States, Iran, Russia, and Saudi Arabia due to overlapping geopolitical interests. For example, Iran exerts tremendous influence on the Iraqi government and Shiite militias, some of whom reacted violently toward peaceful protesters, causing the latter to accuse Iran of fully controlling Iraq. On the other hand, the social media and news outlets that are run by these militias do not only attack these protesters by falsely accusing them of being U.S. agents, Baathists, or terrorists, but they also routinely spread disinformation about the United States and the war in Ukraine.